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ABSTRACT

The "Let's Talk about It" program began in Vermont as a reading and discussion group based in local libraries and grew into a program in 30 states and supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The program brought together a diverse audience of adults to read books on selected themes in literature. Humanities scholars enriched the discussion with biographical information on the author, provided contextual perspectives from the literary tradition or historical era, and acted as a catalyst for discussion. The programs often drew overflow crowds. Although the NEH program has officially ended, reading and discussion programs continue to thrive. (RS)

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FEEDING THE READERS' HUNGER

BY ELIZABETH R. BAER

IT WAS NOT ONLY dark and stormy, but thirty degrees below zero in Vermont that night. I drove an hour north from my home to a small town called Wells River. When I arrived at the library, a converted storefront in the center of town, the woodstove was humming, and so was the audience. I was scheduled to give a forty-minute talk on Jean Rhys's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a fictional biography of Bertha, the "mad woman in the attic" in *Jane Eyre*. My lecture was part of a series of five held over a ten-week period at the library. The audience had read the book in preparation for both the lecture and the discussion that followed, which was moderated by a discussion leader. My lectern turned out to be a shoe salesperson's slanted stool set upon a cardtable.

I launched into the lecture on this difficult novel, very much predicated on Bronte's long novel and narrated by three voices. The discussion reminded me again of why I loved to serve as a scholar in these programs. Talk ranged from analysis of the text to insights gained from Rhys about personal lives.

Finally, a woman at least seventy years of age rose to take issue with the interpretation I had set forth in the lecture. "Right here on page 87," she began, in a voice tremulous with excitement, "are examples that show Rochester to be more human than you have depicted him." I could see that her copy of the novel was dog-eared and underlined in several colors of ink. If only my freshmen cared this much about their reading! At the conclusion of the discussion, I had some new ideas about Jean Rhys, and these have affected my subsequent scholarship. I learned, for example, to be more subtle in my analysis of point of view.

Reading and discussion programs of this nature began just a decade ago around a kitchen table in Rutland, Vermont, across the state from Wells River. Pat Bates, then program coordinator at the Rutland Free Library and currently project director for the Howard County Library in Maryland, was a newcomer to Vermont. She had experienced the frustration of reading a good book and having no one with whom to discuss it, of saying to a friend in the grocery store, "I just read Toni Morrison's *Sula*, and it's fantastic" and drawing a complete blank.

Beginning with a reading group in her home, Bates experimented with various formats before hitting on the one that now has been successfully replicated in almost all fifty states and more than 1,000 libraries. Her goal was to establish a context in which a number of adults could all read the same book and later gather to discuss it. To enhance the discussion, Bates introduced the concept of opening each session with a lecture by a humanities scholar.

This scholarly component is the major distinction between reading and discussion programs and other reading projects like the Great Books program. The scholar's role is *not* to provide a tidy analysis of the text, *not* to deliver "the answers," but rather to enrich discussion with biographical information on the author, with contextual perspectives from the literary tradition or historical era, and to be a catalyst for discussion by raising provocative questions about the text.

Bates's early programs, supported by the Vermont Council on the Humanities, focused on women's literature. They soon drew standing-room-only crowds. Bates recalls driving around Rutland and taking down posters announcing the event because the library could hold no more chairs. Adult programming in libraries had never drawn crowds like this, and before long, librarians around the state were clamoring for the programs. Within two years, Bates received NEH support to expand the number of reading and discussion programs offered in Vermont.

I frequently served as a scholar for Bates. I spoke about humanities texts—works by Charlotte Bronte, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison—to eager audiences in small libraries, community centers, and even churches. I "got hooked" on teaching this way because the audiences were hungry—the very best metaphor—for the scholar's information and even hungrier for the human interaction around a text.

These audiences were diverse: adolescents and octogenarians, people with high school degrees, people with Ph.D.'s, individuals from all classes and careers. Each had experienced the human need for a story. Yet they had not had their needs satisfied by the often empty calories of television. Hence, the intensity of the woman in Wells River who re-

Brochures for the "Let's Talk About It" program depict themes that are both far-reaching and entertaining as a means of encouraging public participation in scholar-led reading and discussion programs on literature and ideas.

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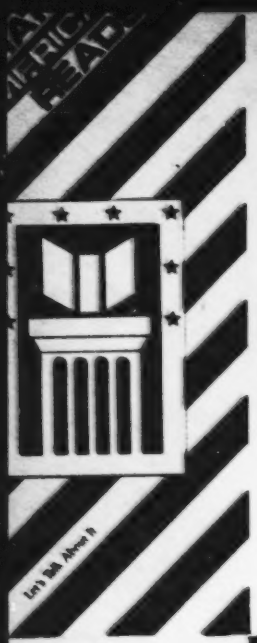
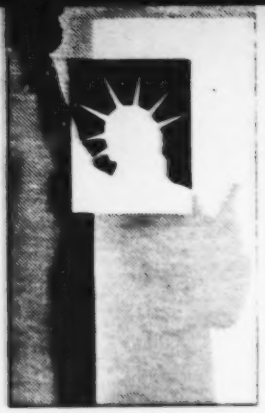
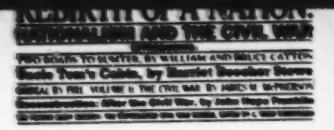
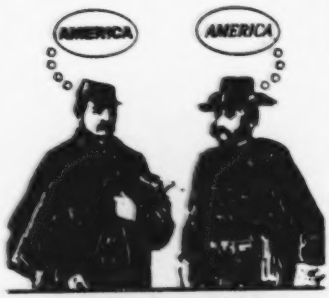


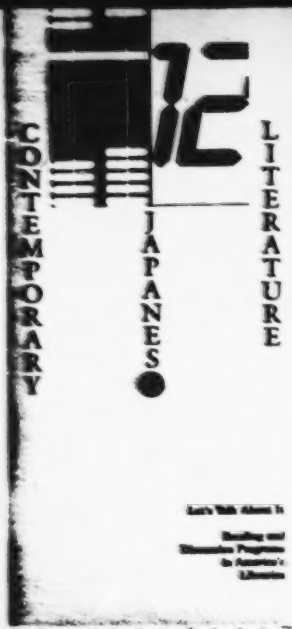


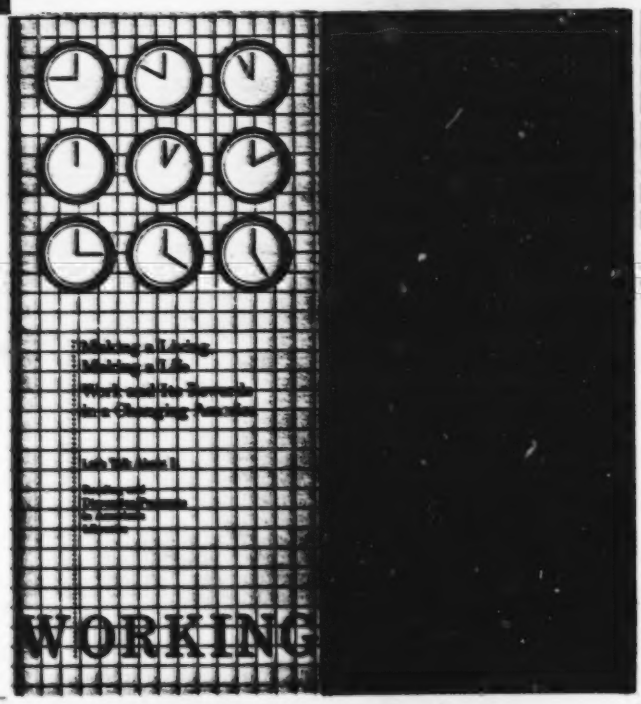
Being Ethnic, Becoming American: Struggles, Successes, Symbols

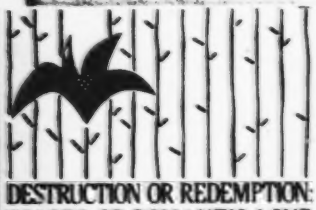
Let's Talk About It
Reading and Discussion Programs in America's Libraries



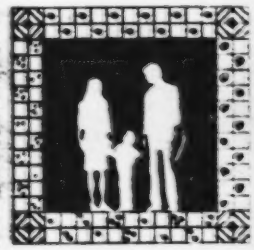








DESTRUCTION OR REDEMPTION: IMAGES OF ROMANTIC LOVE



Family

The Way We Were, The Way We Are

Seasons in the Contemporary American Family

Being Ethnic, Becoming American: Struggles, Successes, Symbols

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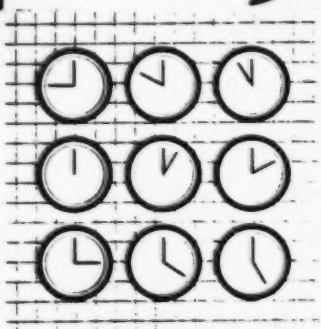

Making a Living, Making a Life
Work and Its Rewards in a Changing America

acted strongly to *Wide Sargasso Sea* and needed help digesting the novel. What more could a teacher-scholar ask than for "students" who are well prepared, eager to talk, willing to argue, and replete with a wealth of life experience?

So addicted to these lectures had I become that I brought the format to Virginia when my career took me to Sweet Briar College in 1981. There Robert Vaughan and Priscilla Little at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy set up meetings with librarians. We began reading and discussion programs with a series called "Southern Women: Myth and Reality." Again, the programs drew the largest audiences for adult programming that libraries in the commonwealth had ever seen. In one community, participation was so great that the books had to be brought in on handtrucks, as 300 people times 5 books equals 1,500 books.

A few skeptical Virginia librarians predicted that these programs would not work in the South. They only worked in New England, they argued, because of its many Carnegie libraries and its tradition of education (and maybe even its long winters). Of course, reading and discussion programs were successfully transplanted from the cold climes of Vermont to the hothouse of Virginia. At this point, as the programs also began to spread throughout the New England states, the American Library Association and NEH began discussing how to take the programs to libraries nationwide.

Aided by an advisory committee of scholars, librarians, and members of state humanities councils, project director Sandra Cooper undertook a program that provided subgrants to thirty states for initiating programs in a total of 300 libraries. The "Let's Talk About It" project, which received $1.5 million in NEH support, lasted from 1983 to 1987.

The project developed ten reading and discussion themes, or prepackaged programs, which can be easily adapted in any public library: "Making a Living, Making a Life: Work and Its Rewards in a Changing America"; "Not for Children Only"; "Individual Rights and Community in America"; "The Way We Were, the Way We Are: Seasons in the Contemporary American Family"; "Being Ethnic, Becoming American: Struggles, Successes, Symbols"; "What America Reads: Myth Making in Popular Fiction"; "Contemporary Japanese Literature"; "The Journey Inward: Women's Autobiography"; "Rebirth of a Nation: Nationalism and the Civil War"; and "Destruction or Redemption: Images of Romantic Love." The themes are published in brochures containing the title and author of the five selected texts as well as a brief blurb on each, a short essay establishing the theme around which the books are grouped, and an annotated bibliography.

"What more could a teacher-scholar ask than for 'students' who are well prepared, eager to talk, willing to argue, and replete with a wealth of life experience?"

The states usually adopted one or more of the themes for initial programs, but when the audiences demanded a second program, the impulse was strong to develop themes around regional issues. Hence there emerged themes with titles like "The Lure of the Pacific" and "Soil, Soul, and Sea: Exploring the Heritage and Culture of the Delmarva."

Although the "Let's Talk About It" project has officially come to an end, reading and discussion programs continue to thrive. They are ongoing across America from Rhode Island to South Carolina to Kansas to Utah to California. A librarian in Hawaii recently reported to me the delight of a couple from Minnesota who, thinking their winter vacation meant foregoing a reading and discussion program back home, arrived in Kona to discover "Not for Children Only" about to begin.

Reading and discussion programs are among the best public programs in the humanities, for they put a member of the general public and a good book in direct contact with each other with some helpful mediation from a scholar. The benefits are enormous. Libraries note increased visibility, better circulation figures, confidence building among librarians, and new cooperation among community organizations. Participants discover new writers, become interested in the humanities, and meet with other citizens to discuss books. "I read books I probably never would have read," said one participant in a "Let's Talk About It" program. "Some I didn't like, but they were apropos to the topic, therefore valuable to the experience."

The experience prompted a participating scholar to muse that these programs "restore a lost audience" to scholars, that is, people who are interested in the humanities as a way to understand our lives in this complex society. Said one scholar, "Virtually all of the discussion among the participants was substantive, intelligently related to the text, but also intimately, intensely, tactfully related to crucial issues in their own lives—marriage, rearing children, loss of a spouse, nurture or the lack of it, disappointment, living through crises."

More than half of the scholars who gave lectures in the "Let's Talk About It" program spent between ten and forty hours in preparation. Eighty-seven percent of the scholars said they would definitely like to participate in another series. One scholar observed that talking with nonstudents and those who were not professional colleagues "makes me more honest and conscientious about how I communicate about the humanities."

The hunger only grows fiercer. Audiences in Vermont who have enjoyed reading and discussion programs in their local libraries for several years now are reading Latin, studying the Constitution, and regularly engaging in sophisticated discussion unimagined a decade ago. In June Pat Bates received a letter from one of the first participants in the Rutland programs. "This is Joan Ballard sending you a thank you letter," she wrote. "Or maybe I should say this is a shared letter of congratulation. Because, as I have said before, your program at the Rutland Library—those long years ago—let me spy a world I had never seen. . . . Sunday, May 15th, I received my B.A. in American Literature from Castleton State College with Greatest Distinction."